



Commentary

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Introducing the Academic Arm of the “Eastern métis” Movement

Two books published in the first half of 2019 by Presses de l'Université Laval—*Le statut de Métis au Canada* and *Les Bois-Brûlés de l'Outaouais*— are the latest in a primarily French-language academic subfield (“Eastern métis” studies) that grew out of the Supreme Court of Canada’s (SCC) *Powley* decision in 2003. Authors in the subfield continue to treat knowledge produced by the courts as the ultimate arbiter of truth when it comes to Indigenous identity, all the while harming Indigenous political efforts at self-determination. Another unmistakable feature of the sub-field is its lack of engagement with Indigenous thinkers. Combined with a bedrock of faulty assumptions about the past and a lavish dose of speculative interpretation, the subfield exemplifies how academia is a generative space for colonial revisionism. These two books in particular aim to ensure that individuals claiming an “Eastern métis” (or “Québec métis” or “Acadian-métis”) identity continue to take up institutional resources reserved for actual Indigenous individuals, whether in the form of scholarships and bursaries, faculty, administrative or advisory positions, or other things.

History and the Creation of the “Québec/Eastern métis”

In his latest work, Denis Gagnon, the founder of “Eastern métis” studies, relies heavily on Canadian courts as the authority on Indigenous identity. Gagnon (2019, 98) can do nothing more than summarize court decisions and recycle secondary sources, since he oddly concedes that using “primary sources would have been an unimaginable waste of time.”¹ Gagnon even cites the histories provided in court decisions for dozens of pages, treating them as untainted sources of historical truth. In addition, Gagnon (2019, 24) dismisses the entirety of Métis/Indigenous Studies as demonstrating “an almost complete absence of any theoretical framework, as if the facts speak for themselves and the researcher was de facto empowered to provide an interpretation without explaining how the data was collected and analyzed.” Given that Gagnon hardly engages with any scholarly material in Indigenous Studies, mentions virtually no Indigenous thinkers, treats court decisions as objective truth, and proudly disregards primary research, his sweeping claims about an entire discipline are particularly objectionable.

Predictably, Gagnon makes a number of controversial claims that are bound to puzzle readers with a minimal background in Indigenous Studies. For instance, Gagnon makes the following remarkable claim to argue in favour of the existence of a “Métis” people in

¹ All excerpts from books written in French are the author’s translation.

the Maritime provinces: “In Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, the Mi’kmaq, who were excluded from economic development of these provinces, lived mostly off-reserve . . . Strongly mixed-raced, they self-identified as Métis or Indians [sic] randomly, and at the discretion of federal censuses” (46). The last part of the claim is verifiably false; any serious scholar will discover that there’s no evidence that the Mi’kmaq self-identified as a distinct “Métis” people in their territory in either the nineteenth or twentieth centuries (Knockwood 1992; Paul 2000; McMillan 2011; Reid 2009; Walls 2011). What does exist is ample historical evidence that the Mi’kmaq have continued to identify as Mi’kmaq through over five centuries of direct contact with Europeans. Mi’kmaq scholar Marie Battiste’s (2016) edited collection *Living Treaties* is a testament to the painstaking struggle undertaken by generations of Mi’kmaq Elders and leaders to maintain a living memory of the Peace and Friendship treaties signed with the British Crown between 1725 and 1779.

Besides Mi’kmaq scholars, Gagnon could have just as easily turned to contemporary Mi’kmaq political bodies to discover that the idea of a community of “Acadian-métis” people in Mi’kma’ki² is a non-starter. For instance, the Mi’kmaq of Nova Scotia (MNS), a chiefs’ organization representing the thirteen federally recognized Mi’kmaq First Nations in Nova Scotia, signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Métis National Council in October 2018 in order to oppose the “Acadian-métis” movement in the province (Métis National Council and Mi’kmaq of Nova Scotia 2018). The MOU is the latest in a series of public documents published by the MNS to oppose the movement since at least 2013 (Mi’kmaq Rights Initiative 2013, 2016, and 2018). The Mi’kmaq maintain that they are the only people (that is, nation) Indigenous to Mi’kma’ki.

For their part, the authors of *Les Bois-Brûlés*—Michel Bouchard, Sébastien Malette, and Guillaume Marcotte—based their book on an expert report that they wrote in order to support a “Québec métis” organization in provincial court. As such, the book is narrowly meant to encourage ongoing efforts in Québec to identify a “Métis” people according to the Supreme Court’s Powley test. Had they heeded the work of a number of Indigenous Studies scholars who critique the place of Canadian courts in federal recognition schemes, they would understand that court decisions aren’t “objective sources of validation . . . somehow free of the racialized/colonial logics that shaped previous official documentation, historical analysis, or even ethnohistory” (Andersen 2014, 73–74). Instead, their single-minded focus on gaining the recognition of Canadian courts establishes the authors as firmly opposed to Indigenous self-determination. To reach their main objective, they provide excerpts from a couple of dozen archival documents that use the term “Métis” or associated terms such as “Bois-Brûlés” or “Half-breed” and interpret each usage as evidence for a historic “Métis community” in a region north (and west) of Ottawa in Algonquin territory. Despite their engagement with historical documentation, however, their approach is littered with interpretive errors.

² Mi’ma’ki corresponds to all of present-day Nova Scotia, the northern two-thirds of New Brunswick, the Gaspésie peninsula in Québec, all of Prince Edward Island, and parts of western Newfoundland.

First, the authors discuss an 1830 report written by a British military officer, Frederick Ingall, who had been commissioned by the Legislative Assembly of Lower Canada to collect information on the region between the Maurice and Ottawa Rivers (loosely corresponding to parts of Attikamekw and Algonquin territories). At one point in his 55-page travel report, Ingall suggests in passing that the name of a lake (Lac Culotte) was translated into French from the Attikamekw language by the “Bois-Brûlés.” As is typical in their book, the authors capitalize on the appearance of terms used extensively (and internally) to describe the Métis *people* (whose origins can be traced to Red River in present-day Manitoba) to legitimize their claims in Québec.

On Ingall’s statement about the “Bois-Brûlés,” the authors claim that “[t]his assertion [about the translation] is undoubtedly from a reliable source (probably *voyageurs* on his expedition), since in the absence of such precision, anyone would have supposed a [white] Canadien translation” (60). Yet the authors don’t know the source for Ingall’s statement, nor do they know if his statement is accurate. It is more credible to think that Ingall is speculating that a mixed-race Attikamekw individual (that is, “Bois-Brûlé”) likely translated the lake name into French than to believe that he is signaling that an entirely separate Indigenous people (“Métis”) exists in the territory. Whatever the case, Ingall uses the term to relay information that has been shared with him by a third party. As Serge Goudreau et al. (2018, 157) explain, “at no point in his trip does Ingall meet a single individual whom he calls Métis.” In a sign of the importance of Ingall’s statement to their analysis, the authors refer to it as a definitive source of evidence for their claims about the “Québec Métis” on at least nineteen separate occasions in four different chapters.

At a later point in the book, the authors also use a statement by Alexander Shirreff—the well-heeled son of a Scottish lumber merchant—published in a report in 1831 following a trip up the Ottawa River. Similar to Ingall, Shirreff uses the term “Bois-Brûlés” on only one occasion in his report. In the following excerpt, Shirreff is describing a small settlement of abandoned cabins near present-day Beachburg, Ontario, about 125 kilometres upstream from the city of Ottawa:

On this shore, a little above the division of the waters, is the la Bosse [La Passe] settlement, consisting of a narrow entrance, about a mile in length, with eight or ten huts. The poor unprogressing appearance of the place, at once marks it as a nest of old trading people— French, or Bois Brulées [sic]. (cited in Goudreau et al. 2018, 154)

Before long, the authors are claiming that “the area was described as a Bois-Brûlés landmark by Shirreff” (83). To be clear, Shirreff is using the term as a way to speculate about the origins of what he identifies as a run-down former settlement, not to describe individuals he encounters. He ultimately does not know who used to live in those “huts,” nor do the authors. Read differently, Shirreff illustrates his own disdain for non-British people when he uses the term “nest” to describe the abandoned settlement, dehumanizing the former residents, whom he can only assume are French or, perhaps, mixed-race. One is reminded of a rat’s nest or bird’s nest, both of which suggest an unhygienic burrow strewn with animal waste and debris, generally unfit for human habitation. In any case, a

bit later in his account, when he reaches the Hudson’s Bay Company’s trading post at Fort-Coulonge, Shirreff writes eloquently about what he encounters, juxtaposing its “double row of neat white-washed buildings” with his previous description of the French or Bois-Brûlés “nest” of huts at La Passe. Nonetheless, Bouchard et al. transform Shirreff’s racially charged description of La Passe into “proof” that a thriving Métis community exists in the region as early as the 1830s, and repeat this “evidence” no fewer than nine times in their book.

In their own analysis of archival material that features other descriptions of La Passe during the same period, Goudreau et al. (2018, 157) explain that at least three commentators each refer to Algonquin, Irish, Scottish, American, and French-Canadian individuals, but never to a Métis group or settlement in the region. Bouchard et al. do not discuss any of these other commentators in their book, choosing instead to focus on Shirreff’s singular use of “Bois-Brûlés” as a key node of documentary evidence for their claims. This is precisely the type of interpretive blunder that is the norm throughout their analysis: the authors seem so excited about their discovery of new “proof” that they jump to conclusions that are not supported by the broader documentary evidence.

All in all, the two books illustrate the type of major interpretive limitations that are representative of the sub-field of “Eastern métis” studies more generally. While Gagnon stubbornly refuses to consult primary documents and to engage with relevant material in Indigenous Studies, Bouchard et al. see a distinct rights-bearing Métis people every time an author (mostly British colonial authorities displaying strong prejudice towards French-Canadians and even worse sentiment towards Indigenous peoples) uses the terms “Métis” or “Bois-Brûlés” in a document written in the 1800s to refer to a mixed-race individual.

Turning Non-Status Indigenous Individuals into Distinct “Métis” People

Fishing for evidence of a contemporary “Métis” community in Québec, the authors of both books claim that the existence of an organization in the 1970s and 80s bridges the historic and contemporary community in the province. For instance, Gagnon (2019, 8, emphasis mine)—without any additional substantiation—states that, “[i]n 1970, the *Quebec Métis* founded the Laurentian Alliance of Metis and Non-Status Indians in Quebec.” His argument relies on the presence of the word “Métis” in the name of the organization, which tends to be Gagnon’s threshold for “evidence” in his work.

In *Les Bois-Brûlés*, Bouchard et al. (2019, 214, emphasis mine) discuss the Laurentian Alliance of Métis and Non-Status Indians’ (LAMI) newsletter, *Alliance*, claiming that the brief excerpts from the newsletter that they include “attest to the existence of a significant political and social mobilization between the 1970s and 1985 by the *Québec Métis* (including by those in the Outaouais), who united to demand government recognition of their Aboriginal rights.” In reality, the 1960s and 70s saw the creation of a range of provincial organizations advocating on behalf of disenfranchised Indigenous peoples without status. From the beginning, the alliance between Métis and “non-status Indians” was fraught with political divisions. Since the political movement grew out of a prairie-based mobilization, where the Métis were a recognizable political force, all provincial organizations came to

represent “non-status Indians” *and* Métis people, even in provinces where no distinct Métis people existed (see Belcourt 2013, 129–131). In fact, as part of federal funding arrangements, each provincial organization was required to represent Métis people and “non-status Indians” from across the country. Hence, in places as far away from the Métis prairie homeland as New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, the names of the provincial organizations reflected these political realities. Unfortunately, researchers such as Gagnon take the use of the word “Métis” in an organization’s name to mean that said organization advocated for a distinct Métis people *in that province*. Bouchard et al. start from the same premise, then search for evidence to prove their assertion, which amounts to the same type of misreading as in their analysis of historical documents from the nineteenth century.

The truth is that provincial organizations in Québec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia had as their principal political concern advocating for the children and grandchildren of Indigenous women who had lost their Indian status once they married non-status (usually white) men. LAMI, created by Kermot Moore of Kipawa in 1971 and incorporated in 1972, was by far the most widely known organization of this kind in Québec in the 70s and 80s.

By 1975, LAMI had adopted a fourth-generation lineal descent cut-off to stave off non-Indigenous individuals relying on long-ago ancestry to become members. *Recherches amérindiennes au Québec* (1975, 106–108) included a three-page feature on LAMI that provides us with a snapshot of their deliberations: “The Laurentian Alliance is proud of the new membership code, which stipulates ‘descendant up until the fourth generation.’ This year it’s undertaking an audit of the identity of all members who fall under this category.” The decision put an end to the public debate about the nature of indigeneity in the organization for some time.

What’s more, the LAMI repeatedly and explicitly opposed the existence of a distinct Québec Métis *people*. According to its newsletter, the organization specifically used the term Métis (in English and in French) to refer to the children and grandchildren of Indigenous women who had lost Indian status. From its 1978 newsletter: “Section 12(1)(b) says that an Indian woman who marries a non-Indian is no longer registered [as an Indian]. This section of the [Indian Act] has created our non-status Indians, whose children are now collectively known as Métis” (Alliance laurentienne, 1978, 2). An issue two years later featured an interview with the LAMI’s long-time president Rhéal Boudrias, who clarified its position on the use of “Métis” in Québec: “The children of non-status Indians are Métis because they’re almost always born of the union of an Indian woman and white man” (Alliance laurentienne 1980, 7 and 12).

Further, an editorial published in the *Alliance* by the LAMI executive in 1979 made a strong argument against precisely the type of position that Gagnon and Bouchard et al. attribute to it: “The search for Aboriginal rights by the Alliance has clarified an important aspect of the origins of our communities. In Québec, we can’t definitively talk about a Métis nation in the historical sense; our ancestral culture and values are directly linked to the Indian nation to which our members are attached through their family” (Alliance laurentienne 1979, 7). Then-president Boudrias further contrasts Métis existence in the

western provinces with LAMI’s understanding of a “Québec Métis” people in a 1979 magazine interview: “Out West, since Louis Riel’s time, there exists a distinct group of Métis. In Québec, we don’t have the same definition of Métis. Here, in Québec, we identify with [specific] Indigenous groups” (Anonyme 1979, 12). Any trustworthy reading of LAMI’s newsletter must reconcile their broad use of the term “Métis” with the reality that the organization was explicitly against the existence of a distinct Métis people in Québec.

Given their misrepresentation of LAMI’s work, it’s not particularly surprising that Bouchard et al. misinterpret some of the other documentary material that they bring forward by turning mixed-race, non-status Indigenous people into a distinct, rights-bearing “Québec Métis” community in the *Powley* sense. The most glaring example is in their interpretation of a series of correspondence (1892–96) among Oblate priest Jean-Marie Nédélec; the Indian Agent at the Timiskaming (Algonquin) reserve, Angus McBride; and federal government bureaucrats.

What’s clear from the correspondence is that Nédélec—a well-known missionary born in France—is advocating for Algonquin women (and their children) who have been disenfranchised due to gender discrimination in the Indian Act. Yet the authors insist that they have discovered foolproof evidence for the existence of a distinct “Métis” people in Algonquin territory. For instance, after Nédélec requests that “all the half-breeds connected with the tribe either by blood or language” be granted the right to live on the reserve, he receives the following response from the Department of Indian Affairs: “With regard to the land question, and the right of the Halfbreeds to occupy land upon the Reserve, I beg to state that the right of each Halfbreed family has to be considered on its own merits: consequently, the Department would require, before determining as to the rights of occupancy by any Halfbreed, to know through the Indian Agent from which side his Indian blood is derived; that is, whether from the fathers [sic] or the mothers [sic] side” (103).

Despite the bureaucrat’s clear application of the Indian Act’s sexist logic to determine whether an individual is *Algonquin* or not, the authors interpret this statement as proof that the “[c]orrespondents from Indian Affairs nonetheless implicitly recognize the collective and distinct presence of Métis from the area, through the use they make of the ethnonym Halfbreed (Métis)” (103–104). When in his follow-up correspondence Nédélec uses the term “Algonquin half-breeds,” the authors pounce on it as further evidence that we are witness to a description of a distinct “Algonquin-Métis” people in the region. In fact, the authors have unearthed correspondence that illustrates how the relatively new provisions of the Indian Act disenfranchising Indigenous women faced a fair deal of scrutiny on and off reserve in the 1890s. Bureaucrats working for Indian Affairs were aware of such criticism, but remained steadfast in their application of the law, despite appeals by local priests and even, in this case, the Indian Agent.

Regardless, their argument that the use of “half-breed” presents irrefutable proof that both Nédélec and bureaucrats at Indian Affairs are identifying a distinct “Métis” people does not stand up to scrutiny. On this point, Goudreau et al. (2018) maintain that Indian Affairs would often use the term “halfbreed” to refer to the children of Indigenous women who had lost their Indian status (170), and not as an “ethnonym” to describe a

new people, as Bouchard et al. claim. Once again, the authors repeatedly misrepresent events described by the correspondents. The fact is that mixed-race Algonquin children living in the vicinity of the reserve, who often spoke the Algonquin language and were raised by their Algonquin mothers who had lost Indian status (hence the ability to live on the reserve), were being discriminated against as *Algonquin* individuals because of their mothers' (or grandmothers') gender.

The Nédélec correspondence, read alongside the example of the LAMI, clarifies how the authors' interpretive framework, which focuses narrowly on identifying the associated terms "Métis," "Halfbreed," and "Bois-Brûlés" in historical documents, leads them to faulty conclusions. Without considering the Indian Act's history of gender discrimination, the authors are free to imagine a world where discrimination against mixed-race individuals is due to their distinct identity as "Métis." They do so even when there is ample evidence that these same individuals struggled to continue to be known as "Algonquin."

Bouchard et al.'s (2019, 119–154) proclivity for turning Algonquins in Algonquin territory into a distinct "Métis" people comes full circle in their creation of a historic "Métis" community in the village of Lac Sainte-Marie along the Gatineau River.³ They rely on a notebook produced by surveyor John Snow in 1848 in which he identifies twenty male heads of household; the authors then claim that nine of the households are "Métis." Upon closer inspection, their claims fall apart under the heavy weight of contradiction and speculation.

First, five of these families (Lavigne-Kiwekijikokwe, Asselin-Oceabeouakwe/Commandant), Kapimwewittang-Kwekidjiwanokwe, Lavallée-Masanokomikokwe, and Riel-McDougall) are identified as "Métis," even though the women are Algonquin and the men are French-Canadian (in the case of Kapimwewittang-Kwekidjiwanokwe, both are Algonquin). In other words, the authors transform their mixed-race (Algonquin) children into founders of a distinct "Métis" community, without any consideration for how these individuals were identified and identified themselves.

Second, at least three of these same couples leave with their Algonquin children after a short period in Lac Sainte-Marie, in order to move permanently to the new Algonquin reserve created about sixty kilometres north in 1853 (known as Kitigan Zibi Anishinaabeg). Many of their descendants continue to be known as Algonquins today; therefore, including them in this historic "Métis" community in Algonquin territory contributes to the erasure of the historical *and* contemporary Algonquin presence in the region.⁴ These families represent only a few examples of the authors turning well-known *Algonquins*, who are founding community members of Kitigan Zibi, into "Métis" for their purposes.

³ The authors focus specifically on a triangular region among Lac-Sainte-Marie along the Gatineau River, Lac-des-Sables on the Lièvre River, and Maniwaki at the junction of the Desert and Gatineau rivers as the "Métis" region under study. They outline nineteen "Métis" families in their appendix, most of whom are actually Algonquin families. One of the families includes a Métis woman with origins in Red River in Manitoba (Vanasse-Forcier).

⁴ A fourth Algonquin woman and her family (Lavallée-Masanokomikokwe) apparently stayed in Lac Sainte-Marie, though several of her siblings live in Kitigan Zibi as Algonquins by mid-century. A fifth Algonquin woman and her family (Riel-McDougall) lived in the vicinity of Kitigan Zibi, though all of her siblings end up living on the reserve.

Third, Goudreau et al. (2018, 217) explain that only three of the nine so-called Métis families identified by the authors continued to live in Lac Sainte-Marie. Given that the authors consistently use the Lac Sainte-Marie community as definitive proof of the existence of a historic Métis community in the *Powley* sense, going so far as to compare it repeatedly to communities further west cited in the Supreme Court’s decision, its small number of core families presents some insurmountable obstacles.

The three families in question (Naud-McPherson, Fournier-McPherson, and Lavallée-Masanokomikokwe) have twenty-three children among them. Twenty-one of their children marry white French-Canadians with no indication of Indigenous ancestry, and the remaining two marry French-Canadians with a mixed-race mother or grandmother who is not identified as Indigenous in historical records or as “Métis” by Bouchard et al. (Goudreau et al. 2018, 222–224). There appears to be no history of endogamous relationships (that is, in-group marriages) among the three remaining “Métis” families of Lac Sainte-Marie, a sign that places their argument into further disrepute. While it is certainly possible that some of the descendants of the Lavallée-Masanokomikokwe or McPherson lines may be considered Algonquins today, such a determination would be for the Algonquin people to make, according to whichever legal orders they deem appropriate.⁵

The most important takeaway from the authors’ claims about Lac Sainte-Marie and the wider region is that they turn all mixed-race individuals born in the 1800s into founders of a historic “Métis” community in the region, even when these same individuals integrated fully into the Algonquin community or into the French-Canadian community. According to their logic, most of today’s Algonquins are not Algonquin at all, but are part of a distinct “Métis” people, and most white French-Québécois are in fact “Métis” with corresponding Aboriginal rights. Thankfully, only a small (albeit vocal) minority of French-Québécois currently adhere to their violation of Indigenous sovereignty, though these numbers do appear to be increasing as this type of misinformation about the “Eastern métis” spreads.

Conclusion

The publication of these two books and the further development of “Eastern métis” studies will bolster the ongoing efforts to undermine Algonquin, Abenaki, Attikamekw, Innu, Mi’kmaq, Maliseet, and Mohawk peoplehood in the eastern provinces. These efforts include the creation of at least 50 self-identified “Indigenous” organizations in this region since the *Powley* decision, all of which actively lobby governments, courts, and institutions for Indigenous rights. There have been over 110 court decisions against the “Eastern métis” movement in Québec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia alone since 2001, but the organizations continue to press provincial courts.⁶ None of the provincial governments recognize these organizations as representing rights-bearing Indigenous people, nor does

5 The other two women and their families (Naud-McPherson and Fournier-McPherson) are descendants of an Algonquin woman (Marie Pines-Okijikokwe) who married a clerk for the Hudson’s Bay Company, Andrew McPherson, at Lake Victoria (Temiskaming) in 1817.

6 Please consult www.raceshifting.com for information on these organizations and court cases. None of the court cases has been successful in claiming Aboriginal rights for an “Eastern métis” individual or community.

the federal government. Most importantly, virtually all Indigenous peoples in these territories have made repeated public declarations against their claims, and none is known to collaborate with the movement on any basis.

Still, the “Eastern métis” have made headway in institutional settings ripe with post-TRC indigenization strategies. Hired as “Aboriginal” advisors at universities, colleges, and school and hospital boards; as “Indigenous” faculty hires in Sociology, History, Geography, Law, or English departments; and as “Aboriginal” consultants by a range of public, private, and non-profit boards and governing bodies, the “Eastern métis” (and its “Abenaki” and “Algonquin” equivalents relying on the same 400-year-old ancestry) are busy replacing actual Indigenous peoples and serving the interests of white society (see Leroux 2019). In this context, it is conceivable that even well-meaning professors and teachers use work gleaned from “Eastern métis” studies in their classrooms, contributing to harm to actual Indigenous peoples.

It is now time for serious deliberation in our institutions that moves us past an embrace of self-identification as the only feature of Indigenous identity. Indigenous peoples *must* be involved in crafting policies sensitive to and inclusive of those who have been disconnected through ongoing forms of colonial violence (including the Sixties Scoop, residential schools, and child welfare policies), but exclusive of the white people devising new strategies to become “Indigenous.” Let us keep in mind that white people have demonstrated time and again just how far they are willing to go to disenfranchise Indigenous peoples. The “Eastern métis” movement, including its academic arm, is but one of the latest examples of these strategies.

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